

Pink Swans by twowritehands

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Summary:

From her hiding place, Eleven watches over her friends.

Pink Swans

Hopper. Like a frog. Or a rabbit. Or grasshoppers. He is large with kind eyes, eyes that have seen the Upside Down. Eyes that are sad but try to smile anyway. He brings the eggos. I usually get them while they are still warm from his pocket, and he never sees me. Or he pretends he doesn't.

I like him.

He's my friend, so I look in on him like all the others. Where I am is cold and lonely, so I check on my friends several times a day. I would happily join them if I could. Better that I don't. Not safe.

Mike is usually at school, paying attention and ignoring the mouthbreathers. At home, he's bickering with Nancy with a fond heart reflected back at him in his sister's eyes, or he's quietly writing in his Dungeon Master book, a lot of the time he's complaining about chores. Dustin, Lucas, and Will come over to play in the basement almost every day. Laughter. Fun. I like to watch them.

Sometimes, I think Mike feels that I'm watching. It makes him sad. Once, I overhear him talking to his mother. She says very nice things about an After Place called heaven and how heaven has windows. She says I must be watching him through one of those. She's a nice lady. Clean, gentle hands that comb Mike's hair from his face. She's pretty.

I check on Joyce, too. Her heart is always in her big brown eyes, making them shine. She's in a hurry a lot, and she is always tired but she stays positive. She's also got gentle hands, taking care of Will. Making him smile. The other boy, too. Jonathan. He and Will laugh together a lot. Sing songs with beats that make me want to sway. I like to see them all together at the table.

I like when Hopper joins them. Usually he is alone when I look for him. Smoking. Sleeping. Driving around in his uniform. Whenever he joins Will's family, the sadness goes into a box. He has a big smile and a loud laugh.

Sometimes he stays late enough that when Will falls asleep on the couch, Hopper carries him to his bed. He carries Joyce to her bed one evening. She's not sleeping when he does. I don't watch after they get to the room. I know what kissing is but they do more than that. Whatever they're doing, it makes me feel funny.

When Will is sleeping, I can talk to him so I do that instead. We meet inside his head, in the new Castle Byers. He's my friend now. Just like Mike did, Will tells me I'll be safe at his house, with his mom and his brother to look out for me. Hopper, too. Because, Will says, Hopper will probably be his new dad someday and will live there with them.

Talking about getting a dad makes Will smile. The only father I ever had was Papa. And I know now he wasn't good. He wasn't like Hopper, making Jonathan laugh and helping Will with math homework.

Hopper doesn't ask them to do bad things. The only things he ever asks them to do is to take care of each other and Joyce when he can't be there. And when he says they did good, it's just because of a rack of drying dishes, clothes taken off the laundry line, letters marked on school work, or handmade birthday cards for Joyce. There is never blood. Never machines scratching out pointy lines. Never quiet men in uniforms staring. Hungry.

I like Will's family, his home. And Will says they all want me there as a part of it. He says they all worry. They have a place for a sister, if I would just take it. Will doesn't want to kiss me, so I'll make a very good sister he says.

As much as I want to, I won't come from my hiding place, and it's not because it's unsafe for me. Because it's unsafe for them. The Bad Men watch them, waiting for me.

Will doesn't believe I'm a monster. He hasn't seen what I can do. He knows only what Mike and the others told him. He thinks I'm a superhero. Friends don't lie, so I tell him I'm not a hero. He just grins and tells me that's exactly why I am one.

I like Will most of all.

Are you in the Upside Down ? Will asks. He's worried about the bad air. The air that hurt his lungs, makes him cough. And the monsters like vines that pierce right inside you.

No, I say. I'm in between.

I'm the flea that burrowed *into* the tight crevices of the twisted rope. Will wants to know how I did it. I tell him I folded up. He grins at me, *that sounds like origami.*

I don't know what that is.

The next time I come to talk to Will, he has something for me. (He figured out that whatever he leaves in his fort outside, or in his pockets when he falls asleep, he can reach when we're here.) It's pink paper folded into the shape of a bird with a long swooping neck. A swan. He hands it to me. I hold it in my palm and look the thing in its face. Will has drawn sweeping arcs with lush eyelashes for the swan's closed eyes. It looks so peaceful. So elegant and pretty. I smile.

It's one thing folded to become something else. That's like you. Right?

Will is smart. I like his mind. It's swift and can bend around strange notions with ease. His heart is good too, and his mind and heart work together very well. That's how he hid so successfully for so long: he has sharp instincts, exceptional spatial reasoning, a vivid imagination for tactic, and no end to his courage.

Will the Wise. That's what they call him on the make believe campaigns. It fits.

I only ever unfold to get the food Hopper leaves for me. If I don't eat, I can't stay folded. He has eleven of those drop boxes all over town, and though he leaves me a meal three times a day, he holds to no pattern. The Bad Men don't realize what he's doing; not watching close enough. They're getting bored of him. This makes both Hopper and me very happy.

He speaks, once, as he leaves the food. Tupperware full of roast beef and potatoes and four Eggos. "I hope you're doing okay, Ele. Joyce-- Joyce mentioned that since you're twelve, you might need these. We

don't know what you know. But instructions are in there if you need them." He leaves a little bag with a zipper.

Inside it, I find long things of cardboard and cotton and string. I know what these are. A woman at the lab with cold hands, the one that usually gave me shots and pills and put me in the big loud CAT SCAN machine. She showed me how to use them when the blood first came.

I had been unfolding at night to steal these from stores and I'm glad I don't have to anymore. Will says stealing is wrong. I don't want to be wrong.

I'm grateful for Joyce, for Hopper. For all my friends. That's why I watch over them from my hiding place. I will protect them, because they have shown me such kindness.

When Lucas is biking home, and a guy in a truck is falling asleep behind the wheel, the truck drifts to the side straight at him. I unfold enough to shove Lucas out of the road. He crashes his bike and tumbles into some briars but the truck misses him and he only has a few scratches.

Mike can't do a chin up in gym and the other boys are laughing. I lift him up and down until the coach is satisfied and the mouth breathers aren't laughing. Mike excuses himself to the restroom and looks in the mirror with a frown. "Ele?" he asks. I don't answer. Better not.

Will wakes up at night coughing. Choking. He gags up a slug onto his pillow. I know instantly what it is. The Upside Down got inside him. Growing. Like seeds. Like the new heartbeat in Joyce's womb.

Why didn't you tell me ? I demand. I'm horrified he has kept the secret. *Friends don't lie !*

He kills the slug. He has killed all but one he says. One got down the drain. Maybe it's dead. *I don't want to go back to the hospital. Mom can't afford it.*

In his bed, Will keeps coughing. *It's bad sometimes.* He tells me, *But never like this.* He coughs and coughs. The slugs come up into his

esophagus, one after the other. He can feel them like a knot of wiggling tongues caught in his throat. He can't breathe. *Ele, I'm scared!*

I unfold a little. His room is dark and I can feel the air current from a box fan. I hold out a hand and get a feel of the egg sack in his gut. *I'm sorry*, I say. *This is going to hurt.*

Do it , Will says.

The door of his room bursts open, then. The noise has woken the house. Jonathan isn't home, he's working a night shift at the movie theater. But Joyce is there, flipping on the light. Hopper is behind her, throwing back the blankets and grabbing Will out of the bed.

I have to unfold all the way to do this. My feet land on soft carpet. The fan tugs at my dress. When I arrive, Joyce yelps and Hopper cries out. With my hand extended towards the gagging Will, I waste no time in popping the egg sack in his guts. Will screams but the sound can't pass the slugs in his throat, and with a flick of my mind, the knot of slugs flies from his mouth.

“Jesus!” Hopper cries at the sight of the green slimey things. Joyce screams but I cross the rug and stomp on them until they are all dead. Will is breathing, sagging against Hopper’s chest from where the man had scooped him up to do the Heimlich Maneuver.

I look at him, then at Hopper and then at Joyce. I put my finger to my lips then to my ears. The Bad Men have ears here.

Joyce reaches for me, mouth working silently. Will gives me a weak smile, “Safe now,” he rasps for me. *Good*, I tell him. He can hear my thoughts when no one else can.

I nod. Hopper, staring agape at me, puts Will back on the bed with an absent brush to his hair. “How long has this been happening?” he is asking me just as much as Will.

“It’s over now,” Will promises.

“Oh, *Will* !” Joyce whimpers going to him and hugging him tight. Hopper steps towards me, arms extending to hug me, too. I step

away, but give him a smile.

Then I fold back up.

Hopper gasps when I vanish right in front of him. He looks all around and then returns to Will. He knows not to say things that the Bad Men will hear. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he holds Will's shoulder, "We can't help you if you don't talk to us."

"I'm sorry," Will says, and he's crying now. He throws his arms around Hopper and Joyce both. They hold him until it's over. Both are stunned. Horrified. But so grateful he is okay.

"What is that happening over there?" Joyce asks with a silent sweep of her hand towards where I was. She is smart, wording it like that. Innocuous. Ears far away won't care.

"Origami," Will says with a grin. Will the Wise.

Hopper shakes his head, "I'd like to learn more about it. Maybe we'll sit down together sometime, huh?"

"Sure," Will says.

The next time I pick up some food, Hopper has left the pink paper swan with the pretty eyes.